

**Social Gospel Praxis:
Women and Reform from the Antebellum period to Mid 1900's.**

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On May 31, 1905, Congregational minister Washington Gladden addressed the seventy-ninth annual meeting of The Congregational Home Missionary Society. In that address, he hailed the Home Mission for its focus on being more national than denominational, for valuing denominational specialties only as aids in building God's Kingdom and for its deep consciousness of the great responsibility for the national welfare.¹ "The question with the church," he said, ". . . is not so much whether it professes the Christian faith as whether it lives the Christian life." In quoting from Luke 4: 16-21, Gladden illustrates what it means to live the Christian life: to preach good tidings to the poor, to provide release for the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who have been bruised and to preach the acceptable word of the Lord. This, he says, is the inaugural address of Christ himself, a proclamation of the nature of the Kingdom of God, which has been ushered into the world by the life and ministry of Jesus. To live the Christian life, according to Gladden, is to be the servant and helper of the needy, unfortunate and poor.² For this Christ was anointed, and it is this characteristic in Christ that is to be the characteristic of all who would call themselves Christians.³

Gladden, like the other Social Gospellers, longed to break down the barriers that had been erected between the classes and to have the trust of the poor and needy, so

¹ Washington Gladden, *The Church and the Nation*, a sermon preached at the Seventy-ninth Annual Meeting of The Congregational Home Missionary Society in Springfield, Massachusetts, May 31, 1905. (The Congregational Home Missionary Society, 1905), 3.

² *Ibid*, 5.

³ *Ibid*, 5-6.

as to transform the troubles and tumults of society into the Kingdom God had intended. Yet, while Gladden was so eloquent in his articulation of the Social Gospel ideology and in his attempts to call others into the service of God's transforming plan for society, women had already been hard at work living the Social Gospel for nearly a century. How is it that the articulation of the Social Gospel, and the praxis of it, had taken so long to make acquaintance? To understand this, one must look back into history to the activities of women in benevolence, social reform and their ultimate emergence from the "domestic sphere".

In the 1600s, women were thought of as the "weaker moral vessels", in need of husbands and fathers to keep them from their own inherent potential for immoral activity.⁴ Cotton Mather, in a sermon in 1692, entitled *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion*, exhorted women to love, honor and obey their husbands, inferring, according to historian Barbara Berg, women's subordination.⁵ At the same time, Mather praised also woman as "the writer of oracles, which makes Christians wise unto salvation" (in reference to biblical figures Deborah, Hannah, Huldah, and Mary), and as the "mother of Him who is the essential word of God". He even included a list of women in the preface of his book (proof, according to Berg, of Mather's awareness of feminine capability).⁶ This contradictory view of women, as both subordinate, and in need of male oversight and yet capable in specific roles was typical of the period. Much of the thought about women in this period revolved around sexuality and the role of women as tempters and

⁴ Carol Berkin and Leslie Horowitz, Eds. *Women's Voices, Women's Lives: Documents in Early American History*. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 91.

⁵ Cotton Mather, *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion*, (Boston: Reprinted and sold by S. Kneeland and T. Green, 1741), 1-166.

⁶ Barbara J. Berg, *The Remembered Gate: Origins of American Feminism – The Woman and the City, 1800-1860*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 14.

tempted, while men were viewed as the upholders of moral virtue and the moral character of the family.⁷

The Puritans held the institution of the family in high regard. Marriage was considered a relationship of mutual respect, affection and companionship. Colonists were primarily concerned with spiritual freedom, education and the family.⁸ All members of the community were expected to work, and contribute to the well being of society. These very values would later come to the fore as women began to make their move out of the domestic sphere in the coming decades. The sweeping changes that followed the Civil War would serve to change the landscape of society in such a way as to afford new challenges to women and the cultural roles they assumed.

By the end of the 18th century, the roles of moral superiority had switched. Within the post-revolutionary economy, production moved out of the household and into manufacturing.⁹ With this shift, men began to move into the marketplace and woman emerged as the new moral superior, responsible for the moral and religious character of the family. From the late 18th through the early 19th centuries, a new ideal of femininity emerged which not only included the moral well being of the family, but also assigned to women the chief responsibility for shepherding social morality and purveying civilization to the next generation, thereby ensuring the virtue of the new American republic.¹⁰

The woman's sphere essentially promoted women to protector of family morality, upholder of cultural ideals, and defender of religious values. Women were lauded as

⁷ Berkin, 125.

⁸ Gaius Glenn Atkins and Frederick L. Fagley, *History of American Congregationalism*. (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1942), 229.

⁹ Catherine Clinton and Christine Lunardini, *The Columbia Guide to American Women in the Nineteenth Century*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 20-21.

¹⁰ Carolyn J. Lawes, *Woman and Reform in a New England Community, 1815-1860* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 1.

more open to religious sensibility and more sensitive to moral nuances.¹¹ Raised in a Victorian environment where motherhood was glorified as a divinely instituted role, women who fulfilled what God had entrusted to them were given the utmost respect.¹² Spheres of activity were articulated and included public/private, work/home, and male/female. Hearth and home were the spheres of women¹³, while men occupied those of politics and the marketplace. Romanticizing the female sex's moral superiority to the male, Victorian men essentially abandoned the tradition and relinquished the institutions of home and church to their wives, mothers and daughters.¹⁴ From 1865 to 1900, women assumed the dominant role within domestic life. Middle class women incorporated the tenets of the woman's sphere into their own self-image. The cultural perception of their spiritual and virtuous superiority gave them a powerful hold on society, albeit while still being confined to traditionally domestic considerations.

In her book *Women and Reform in a New England Community 1815-1860*, Carolyn Lawes discusses her in-depth study of the Congregational women of Worcester, Massachusetts during the antebellum period. Her findings, through review of women's diaries and social and church records, indicate that while most American, white, middle class, northern women were wives and mothers, the assumption on the part of historians that women were at home during the antebellum period is incorrect. In reality, according to Lawes, women were notably absent from the home.¹⁵ Women, at least in Worcester, actually held prominent roles in their communities, though these

¹¹ Berkin and Horowitz, 126.

¹² Wendy J. Deichmann Edwards and Carolyn De Swarte Gifford, eds. *Gender and the Social Gospel*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 36-37.

¹³ The terms women's sphere and domestic sphere appear to be used interchangeably in the literature.

¹⁴ Fred A. Bailey, "Woman's Superiority in Disciple Thought, 1865-1900," *Restoration Quarterly*, 23:3 (1980): 151-160.

¹⁵ Lawes, 1.

roles conformed to the traditional notion of the woman's sphere. She goes on to say that while the woman's/domestic sphere was a dominant cultural symbol/ideal, it was not necessarily a reality in the day-to-day lives of women.¹⁶ Lawes' research suggests that the continued rigid application by scholars of the separate spheres model and the belief in the pervasive ideology of women's passivity and weakness caused them to fail to examine, and in fact to disregard, women in their analyses of the antebellum system.¹⁷

Lawes explores the lives and activities of three prominent Congregational women in Worcester.¹⁸ Her research draws different conclusions about gender, the woman's sphere, and the realities of daily life in antebellum America. While Lawes does not deny that abstract gender ideologies influenced individual decisions and shaped individual lives, she does deny the unbridled impact often reported in the literature. The women she studied in Worcester had complex lives and relationships. In particular, the three women she studied were able to control many of the social and political activities of their community via persuasion and financial influence. For example, they were instrumental in challenging the installation of the clergy in the local Congregational church. When their choice of minister was not upheld, they dissented from the church and formed a new church in the community. This, among other influential activities discussed by Lawes, was accomplished without the right to vote or have public voice, assuming a traditional understanding of the woman's sphere.¹⁹ Lawes' findings reveal that women

¹⁶ Ibid, 2.

¹⁷ Lawes, 2.

¹⁸ Congregationalists Elizabeth Tuckerman Salisbury, known as "Madame Salisbury", and Rebecca and Sarah Waldo defied gender conventions and influenced both the activity of the church, and the politics of the community. See Carolyn Lawes; *Woman and Reform in a New England Community, 1815-1860* for a full account of their influence in Worcester, Massachusetts.

¹⁹ In addition, Lawes gives an extensive list of the positions women held in the Worcester community in the 1840s. These include many Congregational women, including Abigail Metcalf - dressmaker; Anna Goulding and Frances Pierce - "female physicians"; Elizabeth Stamp and Caroline Farnum - nurses; Sybil Worcester and Anna Ruggles -

were more able to exert themselves in communities where they were known. They had more influence over the local power structures than has been reported. Being unilaterally barred from formal positions of power in the community was actually less of a disadvantage for women during the antebellum period than it would prove to be for the women of later generations as the culture became more urbanized, mobile, and less intimate.²⁰ The increase in the impersonalization of urban culture served to make the social boundaries, because they came to lack intimacy, more rigid than those in smaller more intimate communities.²¹

In Worcester, women made up the majority of church membership. Comprising the majority of membership was not uncommon for women in churches during this period.²² While they lacked formal power in most Protestant churches, they still appear to have had a certain degree of influence. Most churches encouraged women to pursue a personal quest for salvation and to develop and nurture their own spirituality.²³ According to Berkin and Horowitz; “The religious culture of the 17th and 18th centuries reinforced and legitimated women’s social and legal subordination, yet it also sanctioned a woman’s identity as an individual moral being and often encouraged her to examine her own spirituality.”²⁴

boarding house managers; Mrs. Chickering - laundress; Sarah and Emily Prentice - dressmakers; Adeliza Perry - assistant principle and author; Lydia Wilmarth - principal; Martha Earle - teacher. While all held professions that would conform to the domestic sphere, the evidence suggests that women were well integrated into the fabric of the community, and held “professional status” in spite of the current notions of what constituted the realities of the domestic sphere.

²⁰ Lawes, 182.

²¹ Ibid, 182-183.

²² See Berkin for an anthology of women’s writings and records of their activities from the 1600s through the 1800s.

²³ Carol Berkin and Leslie Horowitz, eds. *Women’s Voices, Women’s Lives: Documents in Early American History*. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 125-127.

²⁴ Ibid, 127.

In fact, research by women, about women from this period reveals that while women found comfort in the ideal of the domestic sphere, they also shared in a women's culture and in bonds of sisterhood. These bonds were formed between the women via social contact, often through the church. Sewing circles, bible study circles, and other forms of gathering among women occurred regularly in the community. Their consciousness of gender differences, coupled with their own personal relationships, as well as their strong religious self-identities²⁵, ultimately inspired them to participate in social reform.²⁶

As early as 1795, Quaker Anne Parrish gathered friends to form the "Friendly Circle" which was incorporated in 1811 as the Female Society of Philadelphia for the Relief and Employment of the Poor.²⁷ By 1818 the organization had provided in its 23 years of existence relief to over 11,000 people.²⁸ In 1798, the Friendly Circle opened a house of industry to employ poor women. Initially employing 10, it soon was keeping 50 women busy. Later, in order to provide for the education of the worker's children, a school was opened as well. Before long, the Friendly Circle's house of industries was providing schooling and hot lunches for over 100 mothers and children each day. In 1797, Isabella Marshall Graham formed the New York Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children.

Women took their pious roles to heart, believing that they had the potential to reform their communities. The emergence of benevolent and moral societies spread

²⁵ Kathryn Kish Sklar. *Protestant Women and Social Justice Activism, 1890-1920*. Keynote address given at the Conference on Women and Twentieth Century Protestantism, April 1998.

²⁶ Lawes, 2.

²⁷ Mary Bosworth Treudley, "The 'Benevolent Fair': A Study of Charitable Organization Among American Women in the First Third of the Nineteenth Century," *The Social Service Review*, (September 1940): 509-522

²⁸ *Ibid*, 511.

quickly during this period.²⁹ Women saw the potential of using the skills and energies gleaned from their roles in family life as a means of solving the afflictions of society. Therefore, societies were often established within the definite and narrow limits of biblical passages that included the ideals of being a helper to, the widow and the fatherless, the sick, the hungry, Dorcas and her needle, and Mary Magdalene and her sin.

Minister Matthew LaRue Perrine wrote a book in 1817 called *Women Have a Work to do in the House of God*. He saw women as helpers in the work of charity. He felt that the work of women outside the home was the externalization of the natural and primary functions of women. While their primary duties lay in the home, it was an error among Christians to limit women's exertions and confine their influence. "Women" he said "by their constitution and habits are more suitable for the [charitable] work...[and] that they possess superior intuitions, are more sympathetic, more self-denying, gentler, and that their time, as a rule, is more generally at their command."³⁰ Women were seen as having a crucial salvific role. Yet at the same time, the distinct and unequal nature of male and female was upheld.

In 1847, Catharine Beecher³¹ wrote an essay entitled "On the Peculiar Responsibilities of Women" in which she described the particular role women should play in instituting social reform. "The Great Ruler of the Universe...requires that each

²⁹ Ibid, 510. In 1799, a Baltimore women's group formed an orphanage. In 1801, in both Salem, Massachusetts and Providence, Rhode Island, women formed Female Charitable Societies that provided charity to women. Another was formed in 1802 in Charleston, Massachusetts and others in 1803 in Newark, New Jersey; Albany, New York; Newburyport, Massachusetts, and Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

³⁰ Rosemary Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin, Eds. *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 287.

³¹ Catharine Beecher was a Congregationalist, daughter of Lyman Beecher influential minister. She is famous in her own right as a writer and proponent of education for women. Her writings strongly upheld the notion of the woman's sphere, even in a time when many women were seeking to expand their role in the public sphere.

individual of our race shall regard the happiness of others, as of the same value as his own; and which forbid any institution, in private life or civic life, which secures advantages to one class, by sacrificing the interests of another.”³² Ministers in the early 1800s proposed that women’s roles in the church include a social purpose. Having been entrusted with the moral upbringing and faith of the next generation, women began to see themselves as responsible not only to save individual souls, but also to preserve that of the nation.³³ Ministers increasingly recognized the value of women to the church, particularly if they had a missionary spirit. In fact, clergy depended on women to help them spark the Second Great Awakening.³⁴ There were of course caveats to this support. Women continued to be confined to the domestic sphere, thus clergy regarded work as appropriate to women so long as it conformed to this ideal. Rigid boundaries were applied to the work of women within the context of the church.

The activities of the societies inevitably took women outside the family. This movement occurred without reducing for the women, the importance of the family. By 1815 women’s groups were meeting monthly, managing funds, electing officers, and voting on issues significant to their particular organizations. This activity served to elevate women’s self-esteem. Societies allowed women to explore their own unique abilities and to see themselves as beings beyond the limits of the woman’s sphere. Through benevolent organizations women fought to institute their beliefs, and to give voice to their concerns about the deleterious condition of society they were observing. In time the societies would serve to combine the impulse for reform with feminism, to

³² Nancy F. Cott, Ed. *Root of Bitterness: Documents of the Social History of American Women*. (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1972), 171.

³³ Cott, *Roots of Bitterness*, 148.

³⁴ Catherine Clinton and Christine Lunardini, *The Columbia Guide to American Women in the Nineteenth Century*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 54-56.

take advantage of what Lawes referred to as the “upward tending spirit of the age”. In turn women would soon discover within the context of their efforts to reform the need to address the issues affecting their own lives (voting rights, working conditions, access to education, etc.).³⁵

Women’s activity in societies resulted in their advocating for and nurturing other women. Women’s understanding of themselves as leader’s in the home, was linked with their desire to transform society from what they considered a battlefield to that of a cooperative community much like that of the home. As they found themselves more and more in the public arena, the constricted boundaries of the woman’s sphere were broadened.³⁶ Newer scholarship regarding women’s roles, both feminist and conventional, reveals that in spite of the ideals of the woman’s sphere, women continually dealt themselves into the game of community life and politics, seeking to facilitate new and equitable rules for their communities. Women’s societies gave women a new purpose and nourished their changing social identity.

Besides the desire for greater influence in the community, women’s societies did in fact influence women in terms of their own sense of independence. While charitable societies usually preserved a conventional external appearance, they in fact gave women a new direction. In 1836, Reverend C. Payton Pickman said of the societies, “It is to female influence and exertion that many of our best schemes of charity are due.”³⁷ Throughout the 19th century, paeans to women’s benevolent influence rang from publications to pulpits, as did exclamations of their moral excellence and predisposition

³⁵ Lawes, 182-183.

³⁶ Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty, “A New Womanhood: Vida Dutton Scudder on Women’s Public Role in Advancing the Social Gospel,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 33:2 (Summer, 2006): 159.

³⁷ Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 1..

to religious faith.³⁸ An indication of the readiness with which women came to philanthropy, between 1795 and 1835, religious reform, in the form of benevolent societies became the largest and most important extra-familial activity of middleclass women.³⁹ In fact, the organized activities of middle class women in Worcester, suggest that in antebellum America, the barriers separating women and men, the secular and sacred, and work and domesticity, were in fact far more porous, than they have been pronounced by historians.⁴⁰

Women used their role as the maintainers of Protestant faith as a stepping-stone toward more equal status in the world outside their homes. Benevolent societies had allowed women to gain experience in organizing themselves and in carrying out goals they had set for themselves.⁴¹ Women were able to exercise their particular talents via participation in the work of the societies. "Electing one another officers, handling funds, conducting business meetings, publishing appeals to the public, they [women] mastered procedures of the commercial society in which they lived, but from which they were excluded."⁴² Barbara Berg in her book The Remembered Gate cites two primary reasons for the development of societies, religious piety, and the need for a social outlet for women. This social need she indicates served to allow women to pursue personal fulfillment. This became particularly important to women as the society shifted from the more intimate agrarian communities to the more urban and industrialized cities of the post-war period. Prior to the industrial revolution, women, even in Colonial times, had

³⁸ Lori D. Ginzberg, 1.

³⁹ Ruether, 282.

⁴⁰ Lawes, 183.

⁴¹ Carl N. Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 15.

⁴² Ruether, 285.

worked often side by side with the men. All members of the Puritan colonies had been expected to contribute to the community. With men moving into the marketplace, women, Berg observes, realized a diminished role and an increased sense of uselessness.⁴³

During the mid-1800s, women, having already taken up the cause of moral purity in response to prostitution and other social ills, now moved to the issues of temperance and abolition. The Congregational church played a significant role in the movement to end slavery. It is likely that Congregational women were involved in the effort to free the slaves, and certainly there is ample evidence to show Congregational activity in the underground railroad, however the key female figures in this movement seem to come primarily from the Quakers, and the Episcopalians.⁴⁴ More rigorous scholarship in the areas of abolition and temperance may reveal the degree to which Congregational women were active in the movements.

During this same time period, women became concerned with their own education, and with their rights as members of the society for which they had spent the last quarter century fighting to maintain an acceptable and pious moral standard of living. While some historical references suggest that women were contented with their place within the woman's sphere, there appears to be sufficient evidence in the dairies and writings from this period to suggest that not all women agreed with the limits placed upon them by this social ideal.⁴⁵ Essays and writings began to appear during this time

⁴³ Barbara J. Berg, *The Remembered Gate: Origins of American Feminism – The Woman and the City, 1800-1860*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 154-155.

⁴⁴ Rosemary Skinner Keller, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Marie Cantlon, *The Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*, Vol. 1. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 370.

⁴⁵ Nancy Cott, Carolyn Lawes, Carol Berkin, Susan Lindley, Rosemary Ruether, and Catherine Brekus all have excellent books and articles with excerpts from women's diaries and writings of this time period. As well, books by Treudley, Tarbell, Wollstonecraft and Martineau written in this time period give insights, in these women's own

that addressed the dismal state of women's rights to public voice and public leadership. Harriett Martineau, John Mill, Alexis de Tocqueville, and many other reformers began to speak out regarding woman's rights. These conversations took place both in the United States and abroad. Martineau, in her book *Society in America*, published in 1837, discusses the "political non-existence" of American women. One of the fundamental principles announced in the Declaration of Independence is that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. How, Martineau asked, can the political condition of women be reconciled with this?⁴⁶ Of the woman's sphere and the equality of rights, she said,

The truth is, that while there is much said about "the sphere of woman" two widely different notions are entertained of what is meant by the phrase. The narrow, and, to the ruling party the more convenient notion is that sphere appointed by men, and bounded by their ideas of property;--a notion from which any and every woman may fairly dissent. The broad and true conception is of the sphere appointed by God, and bounded by the powers which he bestowed. This commands the assent of man and woman; and only the question of powers remains to be proved. The principle of equal rights of both halves of the human race is all we have to do with here. It is the true democratic principle which can never be seriously controverted, and only for a short time evaded.⁴⁷

Similarly, in regard to the education of women, de Tocqueville in 1889 said,

I am aware that an education of this kind is not without danger; I am sensible that it tends to invigorate the judgment at the expense of the imagination, and to make cold and virtuous women instead of affectionate wives and agreeable companions to man. Society may be more tranquil and better regulated, but domestic life has often fewer charms. A democratic education is indispensable to protect women from the dangers with which democratic institutions and manners surround them.⁴⁸

words, into the changing view of women and their social and political situation from the Antebellum period to the enactment of the 19th Amendment.

⁴⁶ Harriet Martineau, *Society in America. Volume 1* (New York: Saunders and Otley, 1837), 146-149.

⁴⁷ Martineau, 153-154.

⁴⁸ Cott, *Roots of Bitterness*, 119.

John Stuart Mill wrote his treatise *On the Subjection of Women* in 1869.⁴⁹ This book addressed these and other issues related to the woman's sphere and its potential to limit the talents and contributions of women due to their lack of education and public voice.

Prior to the Revolutionary War, only 40-45% of New England women were literate. Even the Congregationalists, who prided themselves in the area of higher education, had limited access by girls to formal academics. In Boston, prior to 1790, girls were not permitted to attend public schools. For at least another 50 years, primary and secondary education would not truly be available for most young girls.⁵⁰

Where schools did exist for the education of young women, they were run almost exclusively by women.⁵¹ Elizabeth Cady Stanton said of education for women, "Woman's education has been left too much to the church, which has...train[ed] her sentiments and emotions at the expense of her reason and common sense."⁵² Education, if it occurred at all, was for the purpose of preparing women for the domestic role and to "form her into an agreeable companion for a sensible man".⁵³ Instruction focused on the development of moral principle rather than intellectual achievement. This was in part due to the idea that women were intellectually inferior to men.

Well into the 19th century, education for girls remained only rudimentary. Yet many women were eager to become more educated. As early as 1784, Judith Sargent Murray published an article advocating for women's education.⁵⁴ In 1892, Mary

⁴⁹ John Stuart Mill, *On The Subjection of Women*. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1869).

⁵⁰ John von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism: 1620-1957*. (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1992), 273.

⁵¹ Cott, *Roots of Bitterness*, 105.

⁵² Ginzberg, 212.

⁵³ Cott, *Roots of Bitterness*, 105.

⁵⁴ Clinton 37-39.

Wollstonecraft authored “A Vindication of the Rights of Women”, arguing that women would be better suited to serve their communities and nation were they properly educated.⁵⁵ Prominent Congregationalists Abigail Adams and preacher Cotton Mather advocated for the right of women to formal education.⁵⁶

According to women’s scholar Elizabeth Hinson Hasty, higher education even into the 1900s was considered a “social experiment”.⁵⁷ Women who expressed an interest in formal education and intellectual development were degraded for it. Ideas that might take women outside the domestic sphere were generally not accepted. However, by the later half of the 19th century, literacy was becoming the standard for both boys and girls.⁵⁸ In 1821, Congregationalist Emma Hart Willard founded a boarding school for girls, in 1837, Mary Lyon established Mount Holyoke Seminary for women, and by 1841 Oberlin College graduated women from a full curriculum of study.⁵⁹ Women had knocked on the door of education, and it had been opened to them.

The opportunity for education would prove to again alter the texture of the landscape for women, changing their perceptions about their abilities to contribute to the world beyond the old limits of the domestic sphere. This new perception would serve to increase women’s involvement in social reform, and would change the shape of the reform movement in significant ways including a new focus on conditions in the work place, the establishment of a living wage, property ownership and their own right to vote.

⁵⁵ Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, May, Henry F., ed. (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1949).

⁵⁶ Clinton, 38.

⁵⁷ Hinson-Hasty, 156.

⁵⁸ Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977),101.

⁵⁹ Von Rohr, 273-274.

Yet the church, particularly the clergy, did not approve of the shift in the activity of women that began during the mid-1800s. Boundaries set by the church in the 1830s proved to be increasingly rigid.⁶⁰ Ministers esteemed the importance of women, as long as the women met the clergy's expectations by maintaining the proper sphere. Themes of family and social order permeated sermons, requiring that women obey their husbands. Thus, secondary to the church's perception of the shift taking place in the social patterns of women's lives, an alarm had sounded for the clergy.⁶¹

Religion's two-fold message to women in this era was to attempt to elevate women as religious supporters, and to reaffirm both their subordinate position to and dependence on men.⁶² The Moral Reform Society of New York wrote repeatedly that religious leaders were in the practice of impeding their cause. In a letter addressed to Lyman Beecher in 1835, the women complained, "If the cause of moral reform should fail, will it not be because the influence of such men [as Beecher] is withheld?"⁶³ However, appointing women to the activities of benevolence had already nourished the formation of community and purpose in the women. Continued reticence on the part of the church to allow latitude in women's roles has been suggested as one of the reasons women appear to have become more secular in terms of the impulse for social reform.⁶⁴

Of course, other reasons for increased secularization in the social reform movement included a growing class system, unregulated capitalism, the linkage between democracy and the gospel (civil religion), the divergence between religious

⁶⁰ Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*, 158.

⁶¹ Clinton, 55. Lyman Beecher in response to women's growing autonomy passed a resolution that in social meetings of both men and women, women were not permitted to pray.

⁶² Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*, 158-159.

⁶³ Barbara J. Berg, *The Remembered Gate: Origins of American Feminism – The Woman and the City, 1800-1860*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 153..

⁶⁴ See Berg and also Brekus for commentary on the reasons women dissented from the church.

conservatives and liberals, the westward expansion and the intense growth of business. These, coupled with the emergence of factories hungry for workers and urban expansion, created a climate in which the original (pre-war) pious impulse for benevolence on the part of the women was replaced with a focus on rationality, efficiency, foresight and planning.

According to some scholars, a business rhetoric displaced the sense of compassion that had existed in the antebellum period.⁶⁵ The Gilded Age, from 1877-1890, saw 10 % of the families in the United States possessing 90% of the wealth.⁶⁶ Moral virtue no longer held sway with the women. The ideology of benevolence had allowed the activists of the antebellum period to express the best hopes for a moral society, the post war period, demonstrated a far more pessimistic and insulated perspective about human nature and the limits of reform.⁶⁷ According to historian Lori Ginzberg, “The post war language of corporatism and scientific charity was a significant challenge to the rhetoric of antebellum female benevolence even though the organizational lessons learned earlier persisted into the postwar world.”⁶⁸

A shift had occurred away from the long held idea that traits were inherent to and shared by all women, to a model that understood skills to be learned via experience and work. During this period the charitable organizational movement sought to “separate philanthropy from religion and bring it into harmony with the principles of political economy.”⁶⁹ By around 1850, many of the original benevolent workers had become

⁶⁵ Ginzberg, 203-207

⁶⁶ Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 318.

⁶⁷ Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 200.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 206.

political activists in a secular society. They advocated the ideals of science and law, over piety and religious doctrine.⁷⁰ Ginzberg has argued that this movement was primarily related to the development of a differentiated class, with the upper classes more focused on controlling the lower, than on particular works of benevolence. Others have argued against her position in the literature.⁷¹ Allen Davis, in Spearheads for Reform, indicates that the emphasis of social reform became sociological rather than religious. Denomination and dogma meant less and less, but the desire to serve remained strong.⁷²

In an essay in the book *Gender and the Social Gospel*, R.A.R. Edwards discusses his notion about the relationship between the secularization of the movement and the decline in the once traditional Protestant Calvinism. Calvinism, over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries he says, had become distracted with “increasingly peripheral issues”.⁷³ This, coupled with new scientific theories and Darwinism, began to make significant inroads into social thought.⁷⁴

Others had argued that the shift occurred because of the persistence of the Puritan emphasis on the need exclusively for the re-generation of the individual soul,

⁷⁰ See Sklar, *Protestant Women and Social Justice Activism, 1890-1920*, for a discussion of historian’s bias against religion in the field of U.S. women’s history. Sklar discusses the omission by historians of religious attitudes and understandings that motivate women’s roles in history. She asks the question, “What do historians lose when they ignore religion in Protestant women’s activism during the progressive era?”

⁷¹ See Lawes, Brekus, Berkin, Clinton, Deichmann, Davis and Sklar for various interpretations of the reasons for secularization in the movement.

⁷² Allen F. Davis, *Spearheads for Reform: The Social Settlements and the Progressive Movement, 1890-1914*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 27-29.

⁷³ In this context, Edwards is referring to infant damnation, election and predestination. Ruether, in contrast, suggests that Congregationalists at the time of the Great Awakening had relinquished Calvinism in favor of offering salvation on increasingly democratic terms to “all who would have it” in the revivals of mid-1700s (See *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, pages 282-283). Still others have suggested that it was not until liberals like Bushnell, and Gladden that the old Calvinistic orthodoxy was broken down (see Wagenknecht, *Ambassadors for Christ: Seven American Preachers*, 183.)

⁷⁴ Wendy J. Deichmann Edwards and Carolyn De Swarte Gifford, Eds. *Gender and the Social Gospel*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 151-153.

over against the newer ideals about the social nature of sin and social salvation.⁷⁵ This seems at least somewhat inconsistent with the historical record, however, since Martineau had articulated the need for emphasis on both the individual soul and the universal church when she said in 1837, “Religion is, in its widest sense, the tendency of human nature to the Infinite; and its principle is manifested in the pursuit of perfection in any direction whatever...[it] is an exclusively private and individual concern, while also a concern with the universal.”⁷⁶

In addition to the articulation of the universal nature of salvation is the fact that Puritan life placed such a profound emphasis on community, and the responsibility of all members of the community for the faith and life of the community. Catherine Brekus says of the Puritans, “The very presence of women among the spiritual leaders in New England alters the overall characterization of Puritanism itself, since it underscores the egalitarian thrust of its radical religiosity.” (As early as 1651, she cites an example of women petitioning the court of Malden regarding leadership of the local church).⁷⁷

Nevertheless, as one reads the reports of historians it would appear that the activity of women was becoming more secular and less related to the ideology of the spheres or their own particular religious persuasions. Even Catharine Beecher made the analogy between democracy and religion saying, “The principles of democracy are identical to the principles of Christianity.”⁷⁸ As the 19th century approached, the growing

⁷⁵ Ibid, 150.

⁷⁶ Martineau, 314.

⁷⁷ Catherine A. Brekus, “Sara Osborn’s Enlightenment: Reimagining Eighteenth-Century Intellectual History,” in *The Religious History of American Women: Reimagining the Past*. Brekus, ed. Catherin A., (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 67.

⁷⁸ Cott, *Roots of Bitterness*, 171.

number of literate women would have an enormous impact on social reform in the workplace and in the cities.

Susan Lindley, in an article called “Women and the Social Gospel Novel”, explores women’s own perceptions of reform, and their social and religious self-awareness through the evaluation of novels and stories written by women during the late 19th century.⁷⁹ Her work suggests that during this period, women were struggling with their religious identity. Women, when thinking theologically, tended to be more focused on praxis than on orthodoxy.⁸⁰ Through her research on women’s literary contributions, Lindley concludes that because women were excluded from leadership, teaching, business ownership, and ministry, they had to define their own institutions, and roles if they were to act on their impulse for social reform.⁸¹ However, by the early 1900s, liberals had accepted the changed role of women to include preaching, voting, and philanthropic reform, conservatives rejected this.⁸²

Into this milieu came the articulation of the Social Gospel movement from people like Walter Rauschenbusch, Josiah Strong, Vida Scudder, and Washington Gladden.⁸³ Concerned about the fate of the common good and the potential collapse of civic life in America, the Social Gospellers advanced the ideal that God’s Kingdom could not be advanced on earth unless Christian men and women stepped forward to take

⁷⁹ Susan H. Lindley, “Women and the Social Gospel Novel,” *Church History*, 54:1 (June, 1985): 56-73.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 71.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 72.

⁸² Fred A. Bailey, “Woman’s Superiority in Disciple Thought, 1865-1900,” *Restoration Quarterly*, 23:3 (1980): 152.

⁸³ Though Strong is often criticized for his elitism and implied racism, he, among the other Gospellers, had the most highly developed sense of women’s rights, and advocated in his preaching and writing.

responsibility for society.⁸⁴ At this same time, women who for nearly a century had been actively pursuing social transformation, were still busy at the work of social reform.

The voracious appetite on the part of industry for low cost labor, the increase in immigration, and the lack of infrastructure and social services in the cities caused a massive influx of city dwellers living in substandard conditions.⁸⁵ This in turn led to serious social issues. Confrontations between labor and employers, inhumane conditions in the factories, tenement housing, and the widespread use of child labor resulted in a growing awareness that mainline largely middle class Protestant churches were out of touch with the social situations them. In the novel *In His Steps*, Charles Sheldon asked Christians to ask themselves “What would Jesus do?”⁸⁶ Responding to the increasing dangers of the work place, the poverty and crime of the cities, and the need for justice in the marketplace, women continued their efforts toward social change. In 1904, Lillian Wald and Florence Kelley founded the National Child Labor Committee. The Federal Children’s Bureau, was established in 1912 at their suggestion.⁸⁷ Many other organizations for labor reform were established by women during this period.⁸⁸

In response to the needs of the urban poor during the late 1800s and early 1900s, the Settlement House movement arose. Inspired by the Social Gospel ideal that Christ came not only to redeem individual sinful lives but also sinful social structures, settlement workers carried Christian principles of equality and mutual responsibility to

⁸⁴ Deichmann, 152.

⁸⁵ David W. Miller, *God at Work: The History and Promise of the Faith at Work Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University of Oxford Press, 2007), 26-27.

⁸⁶ Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 319.

⁸⁷ "The Settlement House Movement." *American Decades*. The Gale Group, Inc. 2001. *Encyclopedia.com*. <http://www.encyclopedia.com>. Accessed 10 January 2009.

⁸⁸ S. J. Kleinberg, “Children’s and Mothers’ Wage Labor in Three Eastern U.S. Cities, 1880-1920,” *Social Science History*. 29:1 (Spring 2005), 45-76.

poor neighborhoods, establishing residential facilities within the poor urban areas.⁸⁹ In 1886, Stanton Coit founded The Neighborhood Guild on New York's lower east side, followed by the founding of Hull House in Chicago by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr in 1889. Settlement houses provided classes in English, sewing, and cooking, as well as education for poor women and children, in order to assist women to find work. Settlement workers believed that it was only by living with the poor and disenfranchised that one could come to fully understand and appreciate their needs.⁹⁰

By 1910, more than 400 settlement houses were in existence; nearly every large city had at least one.⁹¹ In 1905, there were approximately 339 settlement workers. Of these, 88% reported active church membership. Contrary to the notion that social reform had become a secularized activity, nearly all indicated religion was a dominant force in their lives.

The Settlement Movement was predominantly Protestant, with more than half of the settlement workers reporting affiliation with either the Congregationalists or Presbyterians.⁹² A good percentage of the early settlement workers had some form of theological training. Between 1886-1917, of 188 settlement workers whose religious affiliation was known, 53 were Congregationalists, 42 were Presbyterians, and 31 were Episcopalians. Of the 188, 145 were women.⁹³

Many in the Settlement Movement saw the houses as a concrete way to promote social justice in America, and to, as Gladden had put it, “. . . break down the barriers

⁸⁹ “The Settlement House Movement,” <http://www.encyclopedia.com>. Accessed 10 January 2009..

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Allen F. Davis, *Spearheads for Reform: The Social Settlements and the Progressive Movement, 1890-1914*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 27-29.

⁹² Statistics taken from: Allen F. Davis, *Spearheads for Reform: The Social Settlements and the Progressive Movement, 1890-1914*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 3-39.

⁹³ Davis, 3-39.

that separate us from them, to overcome their suspicions and fears, to make them believe that we love them, that their interests are dear to us, that the brotherhood of man is not to us a phrase, but the central fact of our lives.”⁹⁴

The promoters of the Social Gospel “sought theological legitimacy in and gave hermeneutical primacy to the doctrine of the Kingdom of God.”⁹⁵ The primary thrust of Gladden’s message in 1899 was that, “One child of the Father cannot enslave another, nor exploit another—the strong, and wise cannot take advantage of the weak and crippled and ignorant. Each must care for the welfare of all, this is the law of brotherhood.”⁹⁶ Ironically, though Gladden extolled the virtue of equality, women would not achieve the right to vote for another decade.

In 1908, a group of churches with ecumenical interests formed the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America. This group drafted the Social Creed of the Churches, a declaration calling for churches to stand together for equal rights, improved working conditions in factories, a fair living wage, and the elimination of child labor, among many other significant reforms.⁹⁷ In an address the year before at the National Council in New Hampshire, Gladden had said, “Ever since we got rid of absolutism, and feudalism, and paternalism, we have been trying to build our civilization on the basis of moral individualism . . . self interest has been recognized as the regulative principle of the social organism . . . no society can march hell-ward faster than a democracy under the banner of unbridled individualism.”⁹⁸ The Social Gospellers Scudder,

⁹⁴ Gladden, *The Church and the Nation*, 15.

⁹⁵ Miller, 28.

⁹⁶ Noll, 323.

⁹⁷ Elias B. Sanford, ed, *Report of the First Meeting of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, Philadelphia, 1908*. (New York, The Revell Press, 1908), 238.

⁹⁸ Gaius Glenn Atkins and Frederick L. Fagley. *History of American Congregationalism*. (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1942), 255.

Rauschenbusch and Gladden, among others, challenged the complacency of the mainline churches. Rauschenbusch even asserted that “a cozy alliance between the business interests of the middle class,” and that the church , “cut the heart from the gospel.”⁹⁹ For the Gospellers, the realization of the Kingdom was to embrace the whole of human life and to transform social order. By 1913, the Congregational church wrote its own statement reflecting the ideals of the Social Gospel in the form of the Kansas City Statement of Faith.¹⁰⁰ It demonstrated the degree to which the old dogmatic Calvinism had diminished in Congregational theology.

Throughout its history, the Congregational Church had encouraged the growth of social concern. From the Puritan focus on the well being of the community to the Social Gospel Movement, Congregationalists’ mission had been to cure injustice by lifting up the level of the whole life.¹⁰¹ According to Susan Lindley, however, “women have been among the neglected reforms, and reformers in Social Gospel study.”¹⁰² It was easy for the Social Gospellers to ignore women as women in their sermons and essays she says. Yet, Max Stackhouse, in “The Free-Church Tradition and Social Ministry”, says of the Social Gospel movement, “Indeed the free-church tradition over the centuries, created the social space in which it was possible to be faithful while retaining intellectual integrity and to be socially engaged without being subservient to secular ideologies.”¹⁰³ The covenant framework of the free church binds pluralistic communities with a common moral vision, according to Stackhouse, and creates the opportunity for wider

⁹⁹ Noll, 319.

¹⁰⁰ Von Rohr, 356.

¹⁰¹ Gaius Glenn Atkins and Frederick L. Fagley. *History of American Congregationalism*. (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1942), 248.

¹⁰² Lindley, 56.

¹⁰³ Max L. Stackhouse, “The Free-Church Tradition and Social Ministry,” *The Christian Century*, 102:34 (November 6, 1985): 995.

actualization of human rights by empowering people to take responsibility for the common institutions of life.

The common threads between the Social Gospel movement of the last century, and Liberation and Feminist Theology are evident.¹⁰⁴ The need for justice in our society is still as urgent a call now, as it was when women first took to the streets of their communities to bring about God's Kingdom on earth. Future research into the common theology between these newer social justice movements and the Social Gospel could prove fruitful. "Free churches," according to Stackhouse, "have a special vocation in the family of Christian traditions. They must surely accept and work cooperatively with the witness of minority, Catholic, evangelical, and ecumenical communions that struggle for civil liberties, against nuclear war, against hunger, and for human rights everywhere. They must bear special witness in the "word" by vigorously preaching and teaching the ethical relevance of a covenantal—prophetic understanding of God's righteousness."¹⁰⁵

Can and will the Congregational church of today be the renewing locus of Gladden's challenge? This will require constant and intentional reformulation of the doctrine to make it relevant to a contemporary witness. The free church must not be just a gathered community but, as so many have said, it must also be a gathering community. It must still include people with little or no voice; those without power, without the networks of support, who confront oppression and exploitation in their daily lives. The free church must be willing, like the women of the reform movement, to enter the struggle of the "other". We cannot remain disengaged, like Gladden said, for new

¹⁰⁴ See Feminist theologians; Elizabeth Johnson, Catherine LaCugna, Ellen Leonard and Liberation theologians Leonardo Boff, Maria Pilar Aquino and Elsa Tamez for further reading in *Feminist and Liberation Theology*.

¹⁰⁵ Stackhouse, 997.

and ominous threats exist to the common good. Systematic violations of human welfare exist still. The free church must recast and reclaim its heritage.

And what of the women? Research in the field of the Social Gospel calls for a revised, expanded definition of the movement. This definition must unambiguously reflect the gender-inclusiveness that characterized the movement and encompassed women and men of various races and classes that were its constituents and leaders.¹⁰⁶ What new questions might be provoked by viewing the movement through the lens of gender? What new questions might arise when we consider the lives of women in their own writings and experiences? What new and exciting directions for research might be realized?

In 1893, Josiah Strong articulated the aims and methods of the Social Gospel in his book, *The New Era*.¹⁰⁷ He sent a complimentary copy to Frances Willard, reformer and president of the Women's Temperance Union, seeking her endorsement. Willard, according to women's historian Wendy Deichmann, "had a habit of scribbling pertinent remarks in the margins of the books she read, often agreeing with the author and elaborating on the author's ideas with her own insights. Occasionally, she challenged the author's views with pointed comments. Her marginal note in Strong's book - The capital error of this book, is that it makes so little of woman."¹⁰⁸ Her criticism could have been leveled against many of the male figures of her time. Let us not, as the biographers and historians who chronicled the Social Gospel Movement, make the same error, that of analyzing, recording or even recognizing so little of the role of

¹⁰⁶ Deichmann, 14.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 42

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 1.

women reformers in the praxis of the gospel. Let us free the women of history from the bonds of the woman's sphere. Hidden there is a rich and valuable history.

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